

Workshop report [July 4th, 2019]

Understanding Business Interaction in Japan*

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1. Introduction

As the popularity of digitalized forms of communication is increasing, the number of face-to-face (FtoF) business meetings (*shoudan*) is on the decline. This trend emphasizes the exceptionality of FtoF meetings and underlines the high expectations customers have for FtoF meetings as they are becoming an exception to the rule.

This research aims to understand FtoF interpersonal interaction between Japanese individuals in Japan in the context of business-to-business meetings. The particularly rich Japanese service and hospitality culture – in consumer and business settings – may offer new or previously neglected dimensions to the dominantly Western-based academic understanding on business-to-business interaction. This understanding offers new insights both to scholars and practitioners in understanding the competence the salespersons need in the highly competitive marketplace.

Sales research can be divided into two research areas: (1) Sales management research (i.e. sales training and learning, sales perfor-

mance and compensation, sales manager as a supervisor) and (2) Personal selling research (i.e. managing customer relationships, selling orientations, salesperson as the boundary spanner). This research focuses on interpersonal interaction between business professionals (salespersons and clients) which as a content area belongs to personal selling research.

Since this research is still work in progress, the focus of the workshop was on methodological issues and the next steps of the research. The audience offered several useful comments to be considered.

2. Methodological considerations

The research follows the philosophical premises of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969). The inductive and data-driven research is based on qualitative interviews and the subjective perspectives & viewpoints of the interviewees. Theoretically and empirically the research adopts the perspectives of both the service/product provider (salesperson) and the buyer (client) which makes the study dyadic.

A constructivist grounded theory (CGT) will be constructed based on the collected data (Charmaz 2006; Glaser & Strauss 1967). CGT offers a practical perspective “to help researchers understand complex social processes” (Suddaby 2006, 638). The goal of CGT is to understand how individuals interpret the reality they have created.

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It is noteworthy that CGT seeks for patterns and connections, not linear causality chains or if-then propositions (Charmaz 2009).

3. Process of data collection

The data consists of 22 face-to-face interviews and 15 self-reported questionnaires cumulating to 37 respondents. The data was collected in the period of May – August 2019 in Tokyo, Hiroshima and Osaka. The data is dyadic as the respondents are either salespersons (28 respondents) or customer representatives (9 respondents). The work experience of the 11 female and 26 male respondents varies from 1 – 30 years and the number of BtoB meetings per week from 1 to 10. In total, the respondents represent 21 different companies. The companies operate in e.g. food industry, tourism, consumer goods, consulting and manufacturing industries.

The interviews were conducted by two interviewers. The other is a Finnish citizen (PhD in Economics and Business Administration) mastering English and basic Japanese. The other interviewer is a Japanese citizen (professor of Marketing) also mastering English and a native Japanese speaker. In half of the interviews the Japanese interviewees answered in Japanese and the content was immediately translated into English by the Japanese interviewer for the Finnish interviewer. Some interviewees were fluent in English which allowed them to participate the interview in English while in some cases the interviewee had asked a colleague fluent in English to join the interview and take care of the translation from Japanese to English.

The 22 face-to-face interviews were conducted in three different ways: (1) in 14 of the interviews, both the Japanese and the Finnish

interviewer were present with 1 interviewee at a time; (2) in 4 interviews only the Japanese interviewer was present; and (3) in 1 interview both the Japanese and Finnish interviewer were present with 4 interviewees simultaneously. The face-to-face interviews lasted from one to two and a half hours.

The self-report questionnaires (translated into Japanese) were handed out during two distinctive meetings (a business book club meeting and nation-wide marketing seminar) resulting in 15 completed questionnaires in total; additional 3 questionnaires needed to be excluded as the respondents mistakenly thought the questions were related to internal meetings instead of external meetings with customers. It took around 15 minutes for the respondent to fill in the questionnaire.

Both the face-to-face interviews and questionnaires followed a similar structure starting from a list of interaction elements and finishing off with a list of salesperson behaviors. For the first part, the respondents were given a list (in Japanese) of 22 typical Japanese interaction elements (behaviors, verbal and non-verbal communication, attitudes); the list was initially constructed before starting the data collection process and updated several times during the process with the guidance of Japanese business professionals and scholars. The respondents were asked to rank each of the 22 elements as 'Super', 'Basic' or 'Not relevant' based on the element's assumed positive effect on the customer during a business meeting. Each respondent was also asked to add new elements to the list if s/he thought some were missing. Finally, the respondent was asked to explain in his/her own words the meaning of the chosen 'Super'

elements based on practical, real-life examples.

For the second part of the interview/questionnaire, the respondent was given a list of 26 salesperson behaviors (in Japanese). The list of behaviors is based on the definitions of Japanese hospitality – *omotenashi* – offered by several Japanese scholars in academic publications. The respondent needed to mark the frequency of the mentioned behavior during a business meeting; always/most of the time/only sometimes/never. In addition, the respondent was asked to select the kind of behaviors that will presumably have the most positive effect on the customer and to offer further real-life examples to elaborate on the chosen behaviors.

The structure of the interviews was radically changed after first two interviews. In those early interviews showing the list of interaction elements was postponed in order not to guide the interviewees thinking too much. However, starting with open-ended questions after some small talk proved to be too complex and out-of-routine for the interviewees resulting in hesitant and short answers. Therefore, in the next interviews the list was shown first and then the interviewee was asked to elaborate freely on the chosen elements.

The list of interaction elements and list of salesperson behaviors offered a safe environment and enough direction for the interviewee to answer the abstract questions – the listed elements and behaviors can be considered as handles for the interviewee to safely open the door into the core of the interview. The primary goal of offering the lists and asking for further elaborations was not to check if the respondents understand the listed elements and behaviors in a similar manner, but to offer a way to open up

their way of thinking. Many respondents started with the listed words but soon found themselves drifting away from the listed words and talking about something more important to them and using their own words which was the initial goal of the interviews in the first place.

4. Comments and questions from the workshop audience

The audience was active in making comments and questions. For example, the following questions were asked: what kind of interview questions were asked, what types of industries and locations did the interviewees represent. It was also commented that research on emotional intelligence and the works of the American social psychologist Erving Goffman might be closely related to the research.

It was also clarified that the focus of the research was not on negotiations but on earlier phases of the selling & buying process. That explains why the interviewees did not bring forth topics like bargaining, negotiation power, price and terms of payment etc.

5. Next steps on the research process

The construction of a grounded theory has been ongoing at the same time with conducting the interviews. Next the preliminary grounded theory will be challenged and updated based on the understanding deriving from the whole gathered data. The finalized grounded theory will be then positioned among related research in the field of marketing and its similarities and differences against contemporary academic knowledge will be highlighted.

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